

Testimony Re: H.B. 6659 An Act Concerning the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2025 and Making Appropriations Therefor (Conservation and Development Agencies/ DEEP/ STATE PARKS)

Eileen Grant, Board of Directors Friends of CT State Parks
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Dear Co-Chairs Osten and Walker, Vice-Chairs Hartley, Exum, and Paris, Ranking Members Berthel and Nuccio, and Honorable Members of the Appropriations Committee,

My name is Eileen Grant. I am a member of the Friends of Ct State Parks (FCSP) Board of Directors and its Past President. I write to you on behalf of my organization, a statewide coalition of 29 all volunteer Friends groups with an overall 7000- person membership, dedicated to the protection and enhancement of the CT State Parks and Forest System.

We write in support of the additions to the Parks' budget included in the Governor's Budget but would like to point out that the proposal for only one personnel position is utterly inadequate to need. We greatly appreciate the continued support for the essential Passport to the Parks fund, but we need to highlight some inherent future challenges.

The Passport to the Parks continues to be a critical safety net for the Park System, and as was conceptualized at its beginnings, provides for budget predictability and long-term planning. Its capacity to cover ordinary expenses going forward, however, diminishes yearly. While revenue from car registration fees will remain relatively flat, operations costs such as fuel, trash removal, utilities and equipment rise precipitously with inflation. So too does the fringe benefit expense for the 35 full time employees paid for by the Fund. Also, wages for the seasonal workforce, which are wholly underwritten by the Fund, rise concurrent with increases to the minimum wage. The bump-ups in wages for seasonals are at once totally deserved, yet insufficient to be competitive with those in the private sector. Young people who are desperately needed to supplement the System's tiny full- time staff choose just about any other job that pays incrementally above the minimum. OPM determines the seasonal wage range; it also caps the fulltime work force at 83 positions, both those funded by Passport and those underwritten by the General Fund. These strictures impede the System's ability to service Parks' exponential growth in visitors.

The institution of the Passport to the Parks in 2018 gave all CT citizens free admission for an unlimited number of visits to any State Park or Forest. In droves, residents took advantage of this program in every corner of the State. In Passport's inaugural year, an impressive 9.1 million visitors patronized the Park System. By 2021, that number had swollen to an incredible 17.4 million visits. We expect that 2022's attendance figures will mirror 2021's at final tabulation.

Parks' growing popularity in the last five years has been staggering even to long time advocates like the Friends of CT State Parks. We are thrilled that families, especially those of limited

means, are enjoying the outdoors in all seasons. In this unseasonably mild winter, the paths and trails at Hammonasset Beach State Park (a mile from where I reside) have been jammed with children on bikes, in strollers, on roller skates and skateboards jostling for space with the disabled in wheelchairs, senior citizens with canes or behind walkers, riders on horseback and innumerable persons exercising their pandemic pets. This heavy influx of visitors is characteristic in every park no matter how remote the location.

What is also characteristic in every State Park and Forest is the absence of adequate numbers of staff year- round who are present to ensure patron safety, to allow for proper frequency of sanitation measures in restrooms, to pick-up litter in a timely way on grounds, to repair baseline infrastructure, to control traffic and manage parking lots, to deter vandalism and to restore Park structures, fencing, gates, and windows when damage is done. Good behaviors amongst visitors need to be reinforced by sufficient on-site staff in our campgrounds, on our forest trails and on our beaches so that order is maintained, and facilities remain attractive and welcoming. Unsafe conduct by hunters, unauthorized usage of ATVs, and illegal dumping in the woods and on roadways are weekly if not daily occurrences. Even a relatively small disruptive fraction of a customer base of 17.4 million can cause real havoc and ruin the enjoyment of the majority. Park field staff, not EnCon officers or police, handle most on-site enforcement issues, direct customer service and, of course, all maintenance and clean-up tasks.

ONLY 83 full time Park workers (inclusive of administrative staff in Hartford) manages the System's 229,000 acres, its 400+ buildings and its service of 17.4 million visits. This level of staffing is patently absurd and it fosters potential hazard in every facility; it also demonstrates breathtaking disrespect to every citizen who frequents Parks and funds them with their taxes.

Friends' advocates have tried to call attention to rapidly diminishing personnel, literally for decades. When I became a Friends volunteer in 1996, staff numbered about 135 having already fallen 50 positions since 1985. Visitation in 1996 was 7.9 million not the 17.4 million of today. In the last 20 years alone, the Park System has lost 41 positions and yet the Governor's Budget calls for the addition of just ONE position. OPM has had in place a cap of 83 positions (inclusive of administrators) for years with no rationale offered for this utterly inadequate ratio of staff to patron. Only about 70 of the 83 FTEs are in the field. No entity in the private sector interested in sustaining for the long term would staff at a level of one worker to every 248,000 visitors. Only one that did not care about retaining its customers, one that was willing to let its infrastructure wastefully deteriorate, or one that had no regard whatsoever for its own overwhelmed workers or the volunteers who have supported operations for years would continue to staff in this irresponsible way.

Our State Park System is a lynch pin of a tourism network vital to our State economy. It is well past time for the Executive and Legislative branches to support this critical System properly. 17.4 million visitors by their enthusiastic patronage in staggering number demonstrate how much they value our protected landscapes 365 days a year. The Passport to the Parks program has enabled them to follow their obvious desire to enjoy nature without being impeded by any

limitations stemming from their economic situations. We ask that you demonstrate that you too truly value the Park System and assure that it sustains for this and future generations.

Please refer to the excellent testimony of CFPA's Eric Hammerling and the tables he includes with break-outs of personnel in each Park unit and the onerous list of resources that must be managed by each unit. This data shows very clearly why Park advocates are and have been so alarmed for many years. We ask that you consider adding a substantial number of State Parks positions in this Biennium Budget to begin to address decades long declining staff levels.

Thank you very much for your attention,

Eileen Grant, Board of Directors Friends of CT State Parks